International Doctoral Students' Experience of Supervision. A case-study in a Chinese University

Lihong Wang and Michael Byram

1. Beijing Language and Culture University; Yili Normal University, China

2. Durham University, UK; University of Luxembourg

Corresponding author: Lihong Wang

Postal address: Building 17-6-11, 15 Xueyuan Road, Haidian District, Beijing, China

E-mail: wanglihong@blcu.edu.cn Tel. 86-10-18600624181

Michael Byram

Postal address: 16 Cavendish Court, Brighton BN2 1FU, England

E-mail: m.s.byram@dur.ac.uk

Authors' Short bios

Lihong Wang is an Associate Professor in Beijing Language and Culture University (BLCU) and currently holds position of Vice-Dean of the School of Foreign Languages of Yili University in China. She graduated from Jilin University in China with MA degree in English Linguistics in 1994 and PhD in foreign language education and intercultural studies from Durham University in the UK in 2011. Her current research interest is in study abroad, Chinese language teachers teaching abroad, as well as the comparative study of teaching and learning beliefs in different cultures.

Michael Byram is Professor Emeritus at Durham University, and Guest Professor at the University of Luxembourg. In the 2000s he was Adviser to the Language Policy Division of the Council of Europe. He has trained teachers and researched linguistic minorities and foreign language education. He is now involved in the Council of Europe's work on Competence for Democratic Culture. His most recent monograph is *From Foreign Language Education to Education for Intercultural Citizenship* (2008). He is also editor with Adelheid Hu of the second edition of the *Routledge Encyclopedia of Language Teaching and Learning*, (2013) - currently being translated into Chinese and Arabic - and, with colleagues in several countries, he is the editor of two books which demonstrate how foreign language and intercultural citizenship education can be achieved in practice.

International Doctoral Students' Experience of Supervision. A case study in a Chinese University[1]

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1. Beijing Language and Culture University; Yili Normal University, China

2. Durham University, UK; University of Luxembourg

Internationalisation in higher education is now a worldwide phenomenon but there is little attention paid to internationalisation at doctoral level, although this phenomenon has grown exponentially in recent years. Here, we focus on a university in China to examine how international doctoral students and their supervisors perceive supervision and the relations between supervisor and student. The study describes and analyses the experiences of supervisors and students, and the concepts they used to articulate and reflect on them. We conducted semi-formal interviews with seven doctoral students and their supervisors. Interviews were carried out mainly in Chinese and themes were included from existing research literature and our research team's own insights as supervisors or students. Interviews lasted up to one hour and were transcribed and analysed thematically. Analysis shows that apart from formal supervision, informal enculturation through social and academic networks, the *tongmen*, plays an important role in supervision and in socializing the doctoral researchers into the community of practice. The study adds to the field a new case from a specific epistemological and intellectual tradition and challenges existing theories about methods and concepts of supervision.

Keywords: doctoral education, supervision, supervisor-student relations, *tongmen,* identity, internationalisation

Introduction

The internationalisation of higher education is widely reported and discussed (Egron-Polak & Hudson, 2014). In some recent work, a new emphasis has been on curriculum and pedagogy (e.g. Ryan, 2012a) with a continuing interest in strategy or in the relationship between research and practice (e.g. Streitwieser & Ogden, 2016). The effects of this process on doctoral education are less widely noted but nonetheless an issue of importance, and one main approach is comparison of institutional arrangements and of educational traditions (e.g. Nerad & Heggelund, 2008; Nerad, 2017). What is under-represented in this field – with some exceptions as we shall see below – is a close attention to the impact of internationalisation on how supervision is experienced and conceptualized.

Where such work has been done it has been based in universities in Australia, Europe and North America and any general conclusions which might be drawn are as a consequence limited in scope. In this article we propose to turn the focus onto the internationalisation of doctoral education in another continent and country, namely Asia and China, where the process has

grown exponentially in recent years. To do this we will present a case study from a Chinese university with an accelerated development in the internationalisation of the doctorate.

Our purpose is to draw attention to the general phenomenon as it works out in a less familiar environment. This will interest both regional and international readerships with a case from an under-explored area, both enriching existing views and theories and challenging them with the new perspective it offers.

The Context: International Doctoral Students in China

Doctoral programmes for domestic Chinese students started in 1981 when the Academic Degree Regulations of the People's Republic of China officially took effect. The design of doctoral programmes today is mainly modelled on those of the US system (Sun, 2010), i.e. the doctoral programme comprises coursework, dissertation/thesis based on research, and oral defence for the dissertation/thesis.

Since the number of PhD holders and the scale and quality of doctoral education is taken as an important indicator of the level of higher education and overall development of a country, doctoral programmes have been expanded quickly in the new century (Sun, 2010, p.3). Since 2007, China has become the largest PhD awarding country in the world (http://www.edu.cn/gao_jiao_news_367/20090728/t20090728_394390.shtml, accessed on August 25, 2017).

International student education in general started in China as early as 1950. However, since the mobility of international students across the globe is generally from less developed countries to developed countries or between developed countries, China's international education has, until the last decade, been near the bottom of the ladder. In the last decade, however, owing to the rise of China economically in the world, the number of international students of all kinds has increased dramatically. According to a report released from the China Scholarships Council, around 440,000 international students from 205 countries were studying at different levels in China in 2016, among which 49,022 students from 183 countries were on Chinese government scholarships. The leading 10 countries sending students to China are South Korea, USA, Thailand, India, Russia, Pakistan, Japan, Kazakhstan, Indonesia and France. Most of them - with the notable exceptions of USA and France - are China's neighboring countries, many of which are in the category of developing countries.

In the report, *National Outline for Medium and Long-term Education Reform and Development (2010-2020)* (http://www.law-lib.com/law/law_view.asp?id=317571, accessed 15 September 2017), the government calls on higher education institutions to expand the scale of international students' education and enhance the attractiveness of their degree programmes for international students. The report points out that government scholarships are being scaled up in favour of applicants for degree programmes, encouraging growth in numbers of international students on undergraduate, Master and doctoral programmes. It states that the government has a commitment to continue funding international education and expanding scholarships to advance high level degree education, especially for students from the 64 countries along the Belt and

Road Initiative, i.e. the plan to create the Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road to connect Asian, European and African countries more closely (See http://jhzggs.nsa.gov.cn/bilingual_view.php?NewsID=314, accessed 25 August 2017). As part of this initiative, Confucius China Studies Programme (CCSP) scholarships have been granted by Confucius Institute Headquarters since 2013, which, together with Chinese government scholarships, are considered to be important incentives to attract more international students to study in China.

The chosen university is a good case-study because it has the largest number of international students among Chinese universities, and is also one of the 16 Chinese universities designated as pilot universities for implementing the 'Confucius China Studies Programme' (CCSP). Though the university has been diversifying its disciplines and programmes, its recognized academic strength still lies in teaching Chinese language to speakers of other languages.

As mentioned above, international students in general are mainly but not exclusively from less developed countries where the degrees from China are becoming more recognized. Student participants in this study are all from Asian and African countries, either on CCSP scholarships or government scholarships.

Previous research on supervision

Within the general context outlined so far, our central concern is how doctoral researchers experience and think about supervision. This is a topic which has had some attention in other countries, for although previously thought of as a 'private space' (Manathunga, 2007), supervision has become a central issue in doctoral research education (Bastalich, 2015), because of its being a crucial factor in the successful completion of doctoral studies. Supervisors need to provide the time, expertise and support to foster the doctoral researcher's development and the production of a high-quality thesis (Mainhard, van der Rijst, van Tartwijk, & Wubbels, 2009). Supervision is also a crucial factor in the more complex matter of researcher identity within a discipline. Foot, Crowe, Tollafield, and Alla (2014) open their article by saying 'The doctoral journey is as much about identity transitions as it is about becoming an expert in research and teaching within a discipline' (p. 103), and Parry (2007) makes the point that 'disciplinary cultures are maintained and perpetuated by means of identification with disciplinary norms and ideologies' (p.12). There has thus been considerable interest in identity issues with emphasis on the experience of being or becoming a researcher, where theories of socialization, social networks and agency are used. For example, Smith and Hatmaker (2014) refer to socialization in their analysis of professional researcher identity among doctoral researchers in Public Affairs. Sweitzer (2009) takes a wider perspective in analyzing factors outside the immediate university environment and uses network theory to show how one group of doctoral students looks for support within the university and its departments while another relies much more on those outside, 'family and friends' and, because she is dealing with doctoral researchers in a Business School, 'prior business associates'.

The theorization thus far has, in short, been focused on doctoral experience as socialization into professional and academic identities, the processes including networks and network theory. We shall see below how these theories can be applied to the international doctoral researchers in our case. The participants in our study are less likely to experience a change in professional identity and links with professional networks outside the university, but we shall see the crucial importance of networks within the university. Furthermore, some of the factors analysed – such as the 'tactics' of Smith and Hatmaker's (2014) participants or the external 'friends and family' of Sweitzer's (2009) group – are probably valid for many types of doctoral researchers but the question is if and how they are valid for international students in general, a question which has not been addressed, and, secondly, whether these theories are useful and hold up in the analysis of the Chinese social context and Chinese universities. For there is in fact no corresponding published research in China, either in Chinese or in English.

Turning to supervisors, their conceptions of the process of socialization are analysed by Gérard (2013) in one educational tradition, in France, where one supervisor works with one doctoral researcher. He identifies six elements: the uniqueness of the supervisor-student relationship, quite different from what exists in Bachelors or Masters courses; that the socialization process is considered a crucial element, perhaps even more important than the research *per se*; that socialization is of two kinds, into the job or craft, 'métier', of being a doctoral researcher and into the profession of being a future researcher; that doctoral researchers are expected to 'play the game', learning the explicit and implicit rules of academic work; that socialization is also a matter of peer-group learning and comes not only from the supervisor; and finally, that there is a difference in how all this is seen in different disciplines. In the same volume, Ntebutse, Jutras, and Joly (2013) point out that socialization is no longer simply a matter of becoming a member of the academy. Increasingly, governments are expecting doctoral researchers to be engaged in future work outside the academy and hence need a different experience than the traditional one analysed by Gérard (2013). They trace the evolution of this idea in several countries. Again there is no corresponding literature in China, neither in Chinese nor in English.

One *caveat* about these studies which refer to 'socialization' is that there is a tendency to use this term as if the doctoral researcher were a passive recipient of socialization processes, whereas the 'recipient' may often respond and shape their own socialization.

Coming to studies on supervision as process, a range of topics has been analysed, namely supervisory tasks and roles (Lee, 2008; Tahir, Ghani,, Atek, & Manaf, 2012; Woolderink, Putnik, van der Boom, & Klabbers,2015), supervisory relationships (Delamont, Parry, & Atkinson, 1998; Hemer, 2012) and expectations towards the supervision process (Ali, Watson, & Dhingra, 2016). Gérard has also interestingly analysed the issue of how doctoral researchers manage the stress of their work (Gérard & Nagels, 2013), with worrying conclusions about completion rates, and the question of if and how doctoral researchers complete their studies is examined by others too (e.g. Skakni, 2011).

Research dealing specifically with international doctoral researchers also includes work on identity. Cotterall (2015) focuses on 'identity trajectories' in her study of six international students and on the lack of departmental support in a community of practice, but does not give specific attention to the fact that they are international doctoral researchers. She finishes her analysis rather lamely with the statement that '[i]t is likely that the participants' international status contributed to the difficulties they experienced in forming research relationships and accessing local networks' (p.368).

On the other hand, Elliot, Vivienne, and Kate (2016), searching for 'a third space' of a creative pathway towards international PhD students' academic acculturation, identify several factors which are peculiar to international doctoral students: loneliness, linguistic challenges and different academic traditions, social connections and relationships. They too discuss 'local networks' but in more depth, and conclude that successful stduents create a 'third space' 'outside PhD life'. The authors then make a number of suggestions for improving international students' experiences.

Turning specifically to work on supervision, Manathunga (2017) focuses more than others on the interculturality of supervision of students in western universities who come from other traditions of knowledge and research. She summarizes her 2014 book by saying: 'I recommended the adoption of transcultural approaches to supervision that situate time, place and cultural knowledge at the centre of doctoral pedagogies' (p.122). Ryan (2016) with 26 interviews with 'senior academics' supports from her data the comparison and contrast between 'Western' and Chinese or 'Confucius Heritage Culture' concepts of scholarship and the potential for a mutual enrichment where "[s]tudents would become not Asian learners or 'Western learners' but 'internationalized learners' (p. 22). Hu, van Veen, and Corda (2016) analyse 'Western' and 'Chinese' expectations of supervision in a self-study of supervisee and supervisor, but with a tendency to attribute all issues to 'cultural differences' using Hofstede's work, and thus exposing themselves to possible accusations of 'essentializing'. Robinson-Pant and Wolf (2016) have a more nuanced approach with their book which is focused on helping doctoral researchers but based on research interviews. There is thus a small literature on intercultural dimensions of supervision, including the contrast between 'Chinese' and 'Western', a distinction to be wary of despite its attraction, since it may lead to stereotyping and essentialism.

Most of this empirical work is based on qualitative data, often with small numbers of participants, and usually the data collection is in semi-structured interviews, including narrative interviews. For example, Taylor (2007) had 12 interviewees; Cotterall (2015) had six participants albeit interviewed in each case between five and seven times; Elliott et al. (2016) had14 participants from a wide range of countries and continents; Smith and Hatmaker (2014) had a larger number, i.e. 27 doctoral researchers from several disciplines connected with Public Affairs; Gardner (2008) also had a larger number with 40 participants. Analytical procedures vary from those referring to grounded theory (Smith & Hatmaker, 2014) or inductive analysis (Elliott et al., 2016) to deductive methods based on existing models (Cotterall, 2015). Our study

is among those with smaller numbers of interviewees, and like the others, needs to be seen as exploration of a case study.

Methodology

This study is part of a multiple-case study in a project (EUROMEC) financed by the European Union's Jean Monnet Programme, which created a network of 5 universities in Europe and this sixth case in China. The study of all six cases will include a comparative methodology, but this article is an analysis of aspects of a single case (Yin, 2003), the doctoral programme at the university in question and, within that programme, a group of students who are 'international' i.e. from countries other than China. It is not intended to be a basis for generalizations, but rather to add to the accrual of cases from which general insights may be abstracted. The more varied the cases, the more reliable the general insights will become, and a case from China, when most comparable research hitherto has been based in Europe and North America, is particularly valuable.

Our approach is interpretative, following von Wright's analysis of two traditions in scientific enquiry differentiating 'explanation' from 'understanding', the latter approach being a reaction against seeking 'generalizations about reproducible and predictable phenomena' as in the natural sciences and a search to 'grasp the individual and unique features' of the objects of study, as in some kinds of historical analysis (von Wright, 1971, p. 5). We search then for 'understanding' in analyzing our participants' views of their experience of supervision, and the overarching question addressed in this article is: How is doctoral supervision experienced and perceived by participants?

Participants were volunteers recruited from personal contacts and a 'snowball' approach. There is no requirement for ethical clearance in the case study university but both researchers have worked in Britain and followed guidelines common in British universities with respect to ensuring anonymity, informed consent and the careful storing of interview recordings and transcripts. This was all explained to interviewees at the beginning of an interview.

There were five supervisors and six doctoral students and the interviews took place between March and December of 2016 (**INSERT TABLE ABOUT HERE)** Table of Participants' Profile). All the supervisees were supervised by the supervisors who were interviewed but the assurance of confidentiality went at least some way to ensuring that all participants, whether supervisors or supervisees could speak freely, and no direct questions about individuals were included as can be seen from the interview schedule in the appendix.

The supervisee participants were either on government scholarships or "Confucius China Studies Programme" (CCSP) scholarships. One interviewee had finished her doctoral studies and found a post-doc position in another city in China, and the others were in their second or third year of studies. Most of them had already worked as teachers or taken a job related to the Chinese language in their own country before they came to China, and they wanted an overall improvement in professional knowledge, skills, and competence in order to have an established status in academia or a teaching career in their own countries. When asked about their

motivations for study in China, most explained that the process of doctoral studies might be similar to their own country, but an overseas degree is generally assumed to be of better quality, especially, the degrees in foreign languages conferred from the target country.

We had promised our participants that we would not ask for more than one hour of their time but in fact the interviews sometimes lasted longer. Interview schedules were prepared with the research questions of the EUROMEC project as the starting point, complemented by insights from the literature and from the experience of the researchers themselves as supervisors and supervisees. The interview schedule in its English version is presented as an appendix but, due to lack of space, the prompts and follow-up suggestions are not included. It also deals with topics which are not analysed here. The purpose was to establish a conversation and discuss the themes indicated but not necessarily in the order of the schedule. All interviews but one were carried out by Wang in Chinese and audio-recorded. One interview was carried out by Byram, in English, and also recorded.

Extracts from interviews in Chinese are quoted here in translation. This adds an extra dimension of complexity which we constantly bore in mind in interpreting the data. The language used has an impact on the relationality between interviewee and researcher and the mode of translation, how literal or 'polished' it should be, are significant issues which have been pinpointed by Holmes and colleagues (2013). The interviews were transcribed in Chinese (with the one exception noted above) and extracts used in the presentation of findings here were translated after analysis.

Analysis was thematic (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Some themes were derived deductively from the research question as operationalized in the interview schedule. Others were developed inductively as indications of unanticipated shared interests and concerns which appeared during the interviews. A system of coding was used in which BS designated supervisees and BP designated supervisors, with key phrases used to designate themes e.g. 'supervisors' competences and expertise' or 'training' (of supervisors). In the context of the larger EUROMEC project, coding terms were developed in one location and then checked and revised in another (e.g. the universities of Durham and Aveiro drew up a coding list for 'supervision'). In this article based only on the Chinese university data, these coding lists were used but augmented by themes specific to the China context. We focus on a subset of themes: the first two being the result of deductive analysis:

(1) modes of supervision;
(2) relations between supervisors and supervisees;
(3) identity development.

The third appeared inductively, as a theme which was raised by supervisors in particular, using phrases such as 'cultivating international Chinese cultural ambassadors'.

Findings

The overarching study in the EUROMEC project will describe similarities and differences in the multiple-case study but here we have space to deal with the issues which are peculiar to the

Chinese university case. In particular, we shall see a special supervision arrangement, a *tongmen.* However, we first need to analyse the term 'supervision' itself because, as we explained in the previous section, we are aware that translation of terms can be misleading. The equivalent of 'supervision' in Chinese is *zhidao* 指导, meaning 'directing and guiding'. The Chinese equivalent for 'supervisor' is *daoshi,* 导师, the literal translation of which is 'guide master'. We shall return to the implications below, using the English term in the meantime for readers' convenience.

The over-arching study will address matters of supervision, but also of the role of language in research, especially when multiple languages are used and the question of if and how international or European researcher identities evolve during the doctoral process. Here we shall focus mainly on the notion of supervision but also specific aspects of language and identity arising from the Chinese context.

Modes of Supervision and the 'tongmen' 同门

The modes of supervision reported by both supervisors and supervisees included group tutorials, weekly or bi-weekly seminars, one-on-one face-to-face discussion, communication via e-mails and WeChat (*wēixìn,* 微信). The latter is a mobile application software and the most widely used social medium for interpersonal communication in China; with its many functions and platforms it is known as China's 'App For Everything'. The supervisors we interviewed had several WeChat groups for different categories of their students. Each supervisor had thus informally created his or her own supervision team consisting of former supervisees and current senior doctoral researchers, who help with the new doctoral researchers as well as helping each other. The specific term for all the doctoral researchers supervised by the same supervisor is '*tongmen* 同门', a term we shall return to below.

The pattern of supervision reported by supervisors and supervisees had different phases. The supervisees met their supervisors more frequently at specific periods: when they were preparing for the thesis proposal, at the beginning of the fieldwork, during thesis writing, and before the final oral defence. The supervisor and the supervisee initially discussed and decided on the theoretical framework, the research approach and the structure of the thesis. During other phases, students worked on their own, and some smaller issues could be easily solved through their WeChat groups.

The students said they had much freedom, but all emphasized 'it is very important to learn how to discipline oneself; if you don't discipline yourself then you couldn't learn or complete a PhD, this is for sure." (BS1). One, interviewed in English, compared this to flying free:

> We don't have a fixed system or a fixed time like we have to meet our professor weekly and report to him what I learned. It's not like that. I'm like a free bird, I feel like a free bird. I can do anything that I want, I can go anywhere that I like, as long as I just tell him what I have done, not like a report. (…) but I will share my feelings and my life with him, in our group actually, not really one to one. (BS2)

BS4 also said it was important to work on schedule and not to make her supervisor worry too much:

> X-laoshi (her supervisor) is really nice. He never criticizes us and does not force us too much. So we just have no heart to let him down. We *tongmen* encourage and motivate each other to work on schedule. (BS4)

Supervisees reported that they enjoyed the freedom granted by their supervisors in choosing their research topic and working pace. BS1, BS4 and BS5 all expressed their preference for more independent study and said their supervisors allowed them to explore on their own, but as for the main directions and big issues, they all discuss these with their supervisors and had full trust in their supervisor's guidance.

Nonetheless, participants also noticed that their supervisors have different supervision styles when guiding different students. For example, BS1 said,

> My supervisor has a Vietnamese student, and she is less independent and would need more help from my supervisor, so my supervisor would tell her what books to read, what to do, step by step, this *tongmen* student meets our supervisor much more often than I do, perhaps it is because she is a foreigner, and she needs more help.（BS1）

It is interesting to note here that BS1 is also a 'foreigner' from Malaysia but categorizes herself differently probably because of her Chinese ethnicity and Chinese language proficiency.

Most of the communication between supervisor and doctoral researchers outside face-to-face meetings was through WeChat, and this new communication technology makes it possible for the supervisee to receive immediate help either from the supervisor or, as we shall see, from other *tongmen*, even if people are not physically on campus.

If, however, supervisees sent thesis chapters or other longer written work, then the supervisor's written feedback would be given via e-mails, and here again we see the importance of the tongmen:

> I'll send him (her supervisor) an email and then he'll send me an email. If he thinks he needs to talk to me then he'll ask me to meet him in the office. We can see that our supervisor is really, really busy, but we never feel that we'll be abandoned, or given up. No. Whenever we need, they're here, if they're not here, they will find someone to make sure that we're helped by the others. (BS2)

This reference to 'the others' is reminiscent of what has been found in previous research, namely that networks inside and outside the institution are important to student researchers (Sweitzer, 2009). However the use of the term *tongmen*, a word which occurs repeatedly in the interviews as we have already seen, gives this reference to 'the others' a particular resonance, and this becomes an aspect of supervision, and not just a matter of general support.

The literal translation of *tongmen* is 'of the same door', similar to 'apprentices of the same master' or 'disciples of the same (religious or martial arts) school or sect'. The first student a supervisor has in his or her career is called the 'opening-door disciple' and the last student the supervisor accepts before retiring is the 'closing-door disciple'. Both may enjoy special positions in the *tongmen* family, a network which is recognized in the university under the name of the supervisor.

All the participants in our study were very satisfied with the attention and care they received from their supervisors, as we saw above, but also from their *tongmen* 'brothers and sisters' as they call each other. They thought highly of this informal mode of supervision which is nowadays facilitated by technology:

> We have a group on WeChat that my *tongmen*, my seniors and sometimes my juniors, even my professor's wife, they are all in the group, so we kind of share life, we have a very strong bond there. Actually we have three groups on WeChat. One is with all the students of my supervisor including those from Hei Longjiang, Tianjin, all over China. And then another one is in [the case-study university], another is an even smaller group, because my supervisor has some post-doctoral visiting scholars, another group is without them, just PhD students. So we have three chat groups, sometimes we share information, sometimes we share news, we share some jokes. (BS2)

We saw earlier, the process of socialization has been referred to in the literature (e.g. Smith and Hatmaker, 2014) but what we see here is a particularly strong version of this with interviewees referring explicitly to the notion of a family, including the professor's wife. The *tongmen* is thus a major resource providing immediate access to support.

The *tongmen* is however also an academic community of learning. It is a family but it is also a source of advice and help which might otherwise be given by the supervisor. It can provide solutions to practical problems, as interviewees told us. If someone is going abroad, for example, he or she will help with collecting academic materials for others; if someone knows of a conference, they will send out timely information. The *tongmen* is also used to help with distributing questionnaires and doing surveys.

Relations between supervisor and supervisee: yi shi yi you, 亦师亦友

As explained above, the literal translation of 'supervisor' *daoshi,* 导师, is 'guide master'. The supervisors we interviewed put more emphasis on their role as a 'guide' than on a 'master'. They preferred intellectual discussions with their students to the lecture mode. They had seminars where students presented their work, inviting others' comments.

Supervisees' relationships with their supervisors have been deemed a most important indicator for the quality of doctoral education (Lee, 2008; Parry, 2007). Recent studies on this relationship in Western countries seem to show a shift from traditional master-apprentice relationship to that of a collaborative partnership (Deuchar, 2008). In Chinese culture, the supervisory relationship is more than professional, and is deemed a lifetime personal bond; we have seen how this begins in the 'family' of the *tongmen*. In the *Regulations on Supervision* at the case-study university*,* it is explicitly stated that the supervisor should build a positive and harmonious relationship with the supervisee. In our interviews, both supervisees and supervisors appreciated this bonding relationship and thought their relationships were harmonious and positive.

The supervisees described their supervisors as caring, supportive, open-minded, willing to listen, and their relationship with their supervisors, which cannot be separated from the *tongmen,* just like that of a family, the relationship with supervisor being likened to that of a father:

> Actually I see my supervisor as father, in China, his wife, we call her "师母", very hard to translate, it's like the master father, the master mother. Both of them treat us like their children---we have a big bunch of students together under my supervisor, so we usually will have activities doing together like we will have the New Year celebrations, the festivals, and sometimes we will even go out for come-

> out thing, karaoke is one of them, we will sing karaoke together, and sometimes we will go to the restaurant, and we'll just have lunch together, sing together. We don't really talk about academy every time, not necessary, we can talk about drama, we can talk about news, anything.

This interviewee also said that this was in her view not just a Chinese relationship but one 'common, especially in Asia' but she also went on to explain how much more significance this can be for an international student:

> So I feel really like a home here when I am with them, I really thank them for doing this because I am a foreigner here and sometimes I feel lonely and it's really lonely that I feel that I didn't attach to anyone, it's somehow a good training for me to be independent but sometimes it's just over (too much), I couldn't take it anymore; I feel I need to attach to someone that I can go well, which is my professor, my supervisor and all my *tongmen*. (BS2)

The supervisor-supervisee relationship was thus seen by supervisees as a close one but seemed to be particularly valuable for international doctoral researchers, and helped them overcome the problems which Elliott et al. (2016) cited earlier have identified. For example, BS6 said she was much touched that her supervisor would always say 'give my best regards to your mom and dad' when she was leaving for home on holiday. If the supervisees' parents and relatives visited, the supervisor showed gracious hospitality.

The supervisors were all aware of such cultural expectations and obligations for their international doctoral researchers. On the other hand, though the supervisees viewed their supervisor as 'father', their supervisors had a different view. They did not think it was appropriate to compare their relationship to that of 'father-son' or 'master-apprentice', for that might sound like an old-fashioned feudalistic bond relation. They would rather view their students as friends. The words they used were *'yi shi yi you'* 亦师亦友, meaning 'both teacher and friend'. One of the reasons may be that some doctoral researchers are already teachers in their own countries, and the supervisor and the supervisee might be of similar age in some cases.

Nonetheless, all the supervisors assume a pastoral role in educating their doctoral researchers, called *jiao shu yu ren* 教书育人, meaning the teacher teaches not just for schooling, but also teaches to build good character in doctoral researchers. That is in line with the socio-cultural expectation of a good teacher in China.

Language issues

During the supervision processes, the international students' Chinese proficiency level is also improved, and the question of language competence was highlighted by both supervisees and supervisors.

Competence in reading and writing were deemed essential for success in doctoral studies because Chinese is the only language used in courses and for thesis writing and defence. That language proficiency may affect international students' demonstration of their real competence in their theses is a theme which supervisors were concerned about. The study of English for Academic Purposes is well established (Basturkmen, 2015), and there is advice on this for supervisors and doctoral researchers (e.g. Paltridge & Starfield, 2007). There is however, to our knowledge, no similar study of Chinese.

In order to improve the international doctoral researchers' Chinese language proficiency, the supervisors paired their Chinese students in their *tongmen* with international students, in order to help the latter with language, since all the work is done in Chinese. Furthermore, the supervisors were all very conscious of establishing friendly relationships with their students and among the *tongmen* students, and the supervisors thought the relationship among the *tongmen* was important not just for their academic career but also in lifelong friendships.

The pairing of Chinese and foreign doctoral researchers (the supervisor called this 'pairing practice' ' *jie dui zi'* 结对子 in Chinese) also had very practical advantages. Chinese doctoral students help their international counterparts to improve their Chinese not only during their everyday studies, but also in thesis writing, making oral presentations and PowerPoints, and proofreading the final version of their thesis. According to the supervisors, owing to the good relationship nurtured over time in the team, Chinese doctoral students do this voluntarily and never complain about such 'sacrifice'. One interviewee told us that, after leaving the university and continuing her post-doc research in Shanghai, she had published several articles in Chinese and still resorted to her *tongmen* network for help with polishing her Chinese language.

Identity Development: international Chinese cultural ambassadors

Developing a researcher identity is one of the main goals of doctoral education across the world, as we saw in our review of research literature, quoting Foot, Crowe, Tollafield, and Alla (2014), and Parry (2007). Apart from acquiring the academic norms and the language of a discipline leading to the research identity, the international doctoral researchers in this study were also ascribed a new cultural identity, specific to the Chinese context and constructed through the process of identifying with Chinese language and culture.

The link between learning foreign languages and the emergence of new identities has already been explored in general terms (e.g. Block, 2007; Byram, 2013; Norton & Toohey, 2011). In this case, a particularly interesting aspect of supervision and the relationships involved is the notion that, through learning Chinese, international doctoral researchers shall become ambassadors, the key phrases being: '*zhihua* **知**华 understanding China, *you hua,* **友**华 friendship with China, and *zhuhua*, **助**华 support for China'.

It can be argued that this dimension is present in many other countries' international education policies and in the use of their cultural institutes to support doctoral researchers (Gil, 2017). What is interesting in our case is that the policy is openly stated by government and by supervisors and is not left implicit. Instead, the doctoral researchers are often asked to talk positively about their experiences in China on various occasions, such as the contest 'Tell a good story about China' ("讲好**中国故事**"). The interviewees' attitudes towards such requests or invitations were generally positive. They said they would like to participate actively if only they had time but often they had to decline the invitation due to pressure of academic work.

The explicit references to this policy were captured by one supervisor in some detail, and compared with other contexts:

> Human beings all have feelings and sentiments. When he or she gets in touch with a society, a civilization, and establishes certain emotional and spiritual relationships with the people of this civilization, he or she naturally develops affinity with this society. For example, those studying in Japan are likely to be pro-Japanese. Of course, they are some counter examples. There is no doubt that those studying in the UK and the US are more pro-British and pro-American. So we can safely say that most people are inclined towards what they are studying. The reasons are simple, that is, he/she feels close to his/her teachers, his/her classmates. Now, many of my foreign students hang out with other Chinese students, playing, singing, discussing, and naturally, the affinity is established. (BP2)…

Networks have been noted as important as we saw earlier, but this aspect of networking is highlighted by the close supervisor-supervisee relationship and the influence of the *tongmen*.

Another supervisor said how important contact with Chinese people is but emphasized here too the effect on later attitudes and not just the reduction of the loneliness of international students noted by Elliott et al. (2016):

> I think we should have this intention to create more opportunities and help for international students to communicate with Chinese people. When they are back in their own country after graduating from China, they will continue their academic work with the Chinese scholarly approach, which is everlasting. (BP3)

He then referred to the fundamental significance of the effect and said it should be seen as a central 'product', although he may not be representative in this way of formulating the issue, as no other supervisor echoed this:

> For example, one of my Vietnamese students loves writing poems, and I asked him to give me two things when he graduated, one is his dissertation, and one is the collection of his poems written in Chinese. You see this bonding relation cannot be severed. I believe this should not be called by-product, but be the intended product of international education. (BP3)

Thus we can see that languages and cultures are not only instruments in producing theses and researchers of a discipline but also in shaping the doctoral students' cultural identity and exerting influence on the whole process of doctoral education.

Discussion

The data have allowed an understanding of how international doctoral researchers and their supervisors experience and perceive 'the supervision'. As we saw in our initial analysis of previous research, it is widely acknowledged that establishing a good rapport between supervisor and candidate is vital to the successful completion of the PhD journey (Mainhard et al., 2009). A good intellectual rapport is based on a shared identification with the intellectual traditions, conventions and core values of the specific field, and this identification is mainly through the process of disciplinary enculturation and socialization, learning the language and discourse of the discipline (Foot et al., 2014; Parry, 2007).

In our particular case, we have seen that the notion of 'supervisor'/'*daoshi*' has connotations of guide and mentor and that some supervisees see this as a paternal relationship. The relationship is undoubtedly felt to be close and likely to be lifelong. All our supervisor

interviewees except one were male and the views of supervisees were influenced by the perception that supervisors are usually male. The question remains open as to whether female supervisors would have analogous or different relations with their supervisees.

Supervisors are on the other hand hesitant about seeing the relationship in this way and focus more on the notion of guidance. Where supervisees refer to the close nature of the relationship, supervisors refer more to the significant role of introducing supervisees to the field, a position which has been noted in literature focused on Europe and North America (e.g. Gérard, 2013 in France; Smith and Hatmaker, 2014 in the USA). This cognitive apprenticeship can be viewed as 'situated learning' through interaction with a community of practice in which 'old-timers' initiate novice learners into the community through modelled and guided practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998). Many studies have addressed this theme of how novice doctoral students are engaged in disciplinary socialization through interacting with their supervisors, peers and other members of the community of practice (Becher, 2001; Becher, Henkel, & Kogan, 1994; Brown, Collins, & Duguid, 1989; Parry, 2007). However, compared with formal supervision and socialization processes of doctoral studies, informal interactions and enculturation through non-institutional networks receive less attention in the literature. The *tongmen* is a network but it is more than a support network noted in previous studies and is a phenomenon worth more attention.

In particular it is important to use a comparative approach to understand the phenomenon more thoroughly. One important function of all comparison is to 'make the strange familiar and the familiar strange', to notice what is otherwise unquestioned in one's own world. The *tongmen* phenomenon is peculiar to the case we are reporting and, though there may exist informal groups elsewhere, the tradition of the single supervisor as described by Gérard (2013) is still in existence and in some university systems still dominant. The *tongmen* phenomenon challenges traditions of supervision which place total or major emphasis on the supervisor-supervisee relationship.

Parry (2007) points out that the importance of socializing with other members of an intellectually powerful professional or disciplinary community has been noted in existing research, but the role of tacit or unconscious learning in these kinds of communities of practice has not generally been assigned the importance it deserves (p.128). Our study has shown that international doctoral students are acquiring the traditions, conventions and values of their discipline as taught in China, as well as Chinese language and disciplinary discourse, both through the socialization process provided by formal doctoral programmes and through the informal but institutionally approved network of the *tongmen*. Both explicit rules and practices of the discipline and tacit values and norms are passed from the old-timers, senior doctoral researchers, consciously and unconsciously, to the novice doctoral researchers. *Tongmen* senior guidance is not just expedient, but effective in confronting and combating intellectual uncertainty and isolation. The novices and juniors are happy to be called 'the little ones' (*xiaozibeir*, 小字辈儿,) mentored and socialized, through this established hierarchy of *tongmen*, on which books to read, when and where to collect data, what the oral defence is like, which journals to publish in, and even what a supervisor's likes and dislikes are. Thus, the *tongmen* provides tacit learning

opportunities for novices to acquire the conventions regarding seminar presentation and participation in discussion, appropriate social behaviour and communication styles. By sharing research and life, the *tongmen* community fosters strong emotional attachment and identity formation too. In short, it is from this *tongmen* network that the members of this community develop not just their disciplinary identity but also a *tongmen* identity, 'under the door of X' (X being usually the supervisor's family name).

This much-prized *tongmen* identity for the supervisors and their doctoral researchers is manifested through 'a strong sense of disciplinary unity and solidarity' (Becher, et.al., 1994, p.78). This kind of bonding may not be uncommon in the universities of other countries, for as Parry (2007) points out: 'the eclectic nature of social science research often gives rise to cliques within departments, as well as within the parent discipline as a whole' (p.58). However, the difference is this 'clique' is not just for specialism or disciplinary solidarity, but also a social network providing both academic and emotional support, creating opportunities for the seniors and the novices to learn from each other and simply to be in each other's company, for example at karaoke. Doctoral students need affirmation, motivation, and intellectual stimulation to continue their PhD journey because of their potential isolation, lack of language competence and general sense of loneliness. As one supervisor said, *tongmen* seminars work like a 'recharger' to provide both emotional support and intellectual drive to push all doctoral researchers forward, whether Chinese or international.

It is therefore important to note that the *tongmen* is a phenomenon already well-established for Chinese students, and the international students become part of the *tongmen* which is thus a major factor in overcoming the loneliness, the challenges of a different academic tradition and the problems of working in a foreign language which Elliott et al. (2016) identified as peculiar to international students. Elliott et al. discuss the 'third space' outside PhD life which some international students succeed in creating whereas in the *tongmen* the academic and the social are intertwined.

In short, the *tongmen* identity is strong, as phrases such as 'we *tongmen*' show. It is also related to a strong sense of gratitude towards supervisors and towards the country. The notable emphasis on how these doctoral researchers will become 'ambassadors' for China is a characteristic which we have not found elsewhere in the research literature. The comments from our supervisor interviewees appear to echo official statements about the purposes of offering scholarships found on the Confucius Institute website:

> In order to foster deep understanding of China and the Chinese culture among young elites from around the world, enable the prosperous growth of China studies, promote the sustainable development of Confucius Institutes, and *enhance the friendly relationship between China and the people of other countries*, the Confucius Institute Headquarters has set up the "Confucius China Study Program" (http://english.hanban.org/node_43075.htm, accessed on August 27, 2017, emphasis added)

This is not unlike the policy in the United Kingdom, for example, where the 'Chevening' award system is described as follows on its website:

> Chevening is the UK Government's international awards scheme aimed at developing global leaders. (…) Chevening offers a unique opportunity for future leaders and influencers from all over

> the world to develop professionally and academically, network extensively, experience UK culture, and *build lasting positive relationships with the UK*.(www.chevening.org - accessed 20 January 2018 - emphasis added)

It is an open question for further research as to whether British supervisors would echo this view or whether the same phenomenon would appear in other countries in such a spontaneous way as we found in our research.

In sum, we have seen in this case that issues arise which are similar to those found in research in Europe and North America, but we have also seen characteristics peculiar to the case and perhaps representative of the Chinese tradition, a question to be explored in further research. The development of an 'ambassador' identity is one of these and it is closely related to loyalty to the supervisor and the *tongmen*.

Conclusion

Comparative studies challenge unquestioned assumptions and suggest how changes in our unquestioned realities may be made even though one must be constantly aware of the warnings which began with Michael Sadler's (1900/1964) warning that education reformers should not 'wander at pleasure among the educational systems of the world, like a child strolling through a garden, and pick off a flower' expecting that sticking it in our own soil will produce a living plant (p.310).

One question our study raises is if and how the notion of the *tongmen* can be transferred to other university systems. This might also in its turn challenge the notion itself, its advantages and disadvantages, and offer new insights for Chinese supervisors. There may, for example, be a limiting influence of the family-like bond on creativity, with those who deviate from the supervisor's approach being shown the door; this is one issue which needs further empirical research.

In her comparative study of traditions of pedagogy in doctoral studies, Ryan (2012b) argues that internationalisation can lead to 'an international academic ethos' with a potential for mutual learning in such matters as different epistemologies and intellectual traditions. Our case study has shown that international students find an existing system of methods and concepts of supervision equally valuable for 'home' students and themselves. It leads to a strong identification with the system of education which they have entered and with the country which is providing the opportunity for study. On the other hand, supervisors themselves, though aware of some of the practical problems created particularly by supervisees' still developing linguistic competence, appear to assume that they will be able to find their place in the existing *tongmen*. There appears to be little awareness among supervisors of the 'intercultural' problems which have been the focus of research in Europe and North America.

Our study has the limitations of all case studies and simultaneously the value of in-depth analysis of qualitative data from a single case. We have argued that the analysis of a case from a Chinese university reveals a new concept which allows a new perspective on the existing research focused mainly on Western countries. Further research is needed in China to create an enriched corpus which can become the basis of generalizable inferences. At this point in time,

and from this study, we expect that readers in Western traditions will gain insight into another mode of doctoral supervision which may challenge them to reflect on what is usually taken for granted.

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Table of Participants' Profiles

Participants	Gender	Country	Years in China
BS1	F	Malaysia	3
BS2	F	Malaysia	3
BS3	F	Tunisia	7
BS4	M	Ethiopia	1
BS5	F	Indonesia	5
BP1	M	Chinese	
BP2	M	China	
BP3	M	China	
BP4	M	China	
BP5	F	China	

Appendix - Interview schedule for students

Purposes – as an opening and general introductory discussion

Can you please say something about your purposes/reasons for doing a PhD.

If you compare with the purposes the university has/your supervisors have, is there similarity or are there differences?

Processes

Introduction – comparing work in a doctoral school and with a supervisor/supervisors

There are two sides these days to doctoral studies, being part of a doctoral school (which seems to be about training transversal skills etc.) and then work with your supervisor on your research topic. Is this your experience, Can you talk about this e.g. in a doctoral school what are the advantages and disadvantages? Is it preferable to focus on your own research for your thesis/dissertation?

So in summary, is doing a PhD like what you expected?

Supervisions

Some people say that every supervision is different and every supervisor is different. But maybe there are some things which almost always take place. Is it possible for your to describe a typical supervision or at least what often happens?

What does your supervisor(s) expect from you? What do you expect from them?

Learning

'learning' while doing a PhD is perhaps difficult to describe or it may not feel like the right word. People learn about their specific topic or research but we would be interested in knowing what other learning you think happens.

Teaching

We are also interested in 'teaching' Again this might not feel like the right word but do you feel that someone is 'teaching' you? Is this different from other kinds of teaching you have experienced? E.g. Does the teaching /learning differ from previous experience at first or second degree (Bachelor/Master)? How?

Student-Supervisor Relations

How would you describe the relationship between supervisors and students – not just yours but think of what you have heard from other students

Language

We are interested in the fact that many people doing PhDs are working in another country and another language – perhaps their second or third language – if this applies to you can you talk about what it means/

Does the fact that you might speak or read other languages outside the supervision process have an impact on your doctoral work?

Are there any constraints or challenges you face in including these languages in your research? (e.g. university policy, openness to other languages in the research process)

International/European – and identity

We are interested in the idea of 'international standards' in doctoral work and whether those doing a PhD feel in some way 'international' or 'European' Perhaps first we can just talk about PhD studies in other countries. Do you know about PhD studies in other countries and if so can you tell us a little of what you know.

[*identity as researcher]*

We are also interested to know more about how doing a PhD is a process of becoming a member of a discipline, or as some people say of becoming a member of a disciplinary 'tribe' or 'club'. In particular we are interested in the language/discourse which is learn as part of this process. Is this how you see the process of doing a PhD/ for example does it make you feel that you are becoming or are now a 'real' researcher , a 'real' member of your discipline?

Again we are interested in the role of language in this. Some people say that becoming a member of a discipline is a matter of learning the language e.g. to 'talk like a historian or a psychologist or to use the language of history or psychology. Is this your experience?

Products/outcomes

Finally we want to ask our interviewees to think about what comes next. For example the outcomes /effects of doing a PhD on people's lives and careers.

General summary – here the purpose is to prompt interviewees to tell us about the experience as a whole and especially an emotional aspects they wish to talk about

So to sum up:

Could you describe a high or low point in your PhD/ the ups and downs of doing a PhD

Another way to sum up is to think about what advice you would give from your experience, what advice you would give to someone thinking of doing a PhD.

IS THERE ANYTHING MORE YOUR WOULD LIKE TO SAY?